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**Looking Through *Headliner* – Can RTHK Become “Hong Kong’s BBC”?**

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## Looking Through *Headliner* – Can RTHK Become “Hong Kong’s BBC”?

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### Abstract

This project examines sessions of “current music video” – the combination of music, spoken words, and current issue images – of *Headliner*, one of Radio Television Hong Kong’s (RTHK) representative yet controversial political commentary programmes. Through studying the use of music for satirical expression which reflects *Headliner*'s politics, this project aims to understand RTHK’s challenges in seeking to attain the status of a “public service broadcaster” (PSB). Beginning as an amateur radio station in 1928, RTHK has been a part of the colonial government since 1929. It has witnessed the social and political changes of Hong Kong, and these changes have affected its status and editorial independence, including the appointments of non-RTHK staff to be the Head of RTHK. In order to avoid political pressure on limiting its production autonomy, RTHK has been attempting to follow the “BBC model” and has sought privatisation since the 1950s; however, and to this day, it is still not an independent media institution. As a result, government officials have scrutinised some RTHK programmes, including *Headliner*. This project seeks to shed light on the possibility of RTHK’s transition to a “real PSB” in the current, post-Umbrella movement era.

**Keywords:** *Headliner*, Radio Television Hong Kong, Cantopop, public service broadcasting

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## Introduction

The public service broadcasting (PSB) status of Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) has been challenged mainly by the China government since the 1980s. RTHK began as an amateur radio broadcaster in 1928 and then became part of the colonial government in 1929. Since the 1970s, RTHK has been producing both radio and television programmes but did not have its own television channel (Aitken & Ingham, 2015, pp.119-122). In April 2016, it was granted three digital-broadcasting channels and two analogue-signal channels for its own programmes (RTHK, 2016). RTHK has witnessed the social and political changes of Hong Kong over the years, and these changes have affected its status and editorial independence. Local colonial government officials intermittently suggested RTHK should operate according to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) model and seek corporatisation, so that it could become more independent from the government and avoid undue political pressure; however, RTHK is still not an independent media institution today.<sup>1</sup> A consequence of this surfeit of independence has been that government officials had the opportunity to scrutinise many RTHK programmes, and especially *Headliner*, after the handover of sovereignty in 1997. The debate around RTHK matches the general media landscape of Hong Kong: while the media were granted a comparatively high degree of freedom of the press, editorial autonomy among Hong Kong outlets has been threatened following closer liaison, especially involving commercial interests, with the Chinese government (Aitken, 2015, pp.96, 100-101). Television is a traditional medium of cultural identity formation in Hong Kong in the eyes of local government officials (Ma, 1999, pp.29-32, 97-99; Lee, 2000, pp.367-368, 371-378). Thus, in recent years, senior officials at RTHK have interfered with the production of *Headliner*, a 27-year-old political commentary programme, in order to shape such formation. Due to its politically sensitive nature, the local government has also threatened to cut it (“Headliner new season from October,” 2010; “Ng Chi Sum worries the cut of Headliner”, 2011; “RTHK’s staff think they are right,” 2013).

In addition to its political content, the use of Cantonese popular music (Cantopop) to illustrate current/social issues in the programme is unique. Some scholars who study Hong Kong popular culture argue that the local population tends not to associate Cantopop with politics (Wong, 1997, p.184; Wong, 2003, p.174). However, and in contrast, Tse states that Cantopop lyrics embody cultural ideology (2012, p.275). The programme is a pioneer in connecting Cantopop with politics and in suggesting to

the locals that Cantopop can be political. Through studying the use of Cantopop in the current music video (current MV) of *Headliner*, this project aims to understand the political stance of *Headliner* and position of RTHK. It also explores the possibility or need for RTHK to become a “real PSB” in Hong Kong.

### **Background of *Headliner***

*Headliner*, a personal-view political commentary programme, was first broadcast in April 1989. It was a coincidence that the programme started during the Tiananmen Massacre. According to Forever Sze Wing Yuen,<sup>2</sup> the father of *Headliner* and the former Assistant Director (Television & Corporate Businesses) of RTHK, due to the local government’s sudden grant of 2.5-hour per week of air time for RTHK television programmes on the two free television channels, the network needed to plan new programmes; one of these was *Headliner* (personal communication, March 9, 2016). Sze also recalled that other major incidents happened in Hong Kong and in the world, such as the Gulf War in 1990-1991 and the arrival of Chris Patten in 1992, which provided topics for discussion in the society and sustained the production of the programme (Ibid.). A year later, the current MV element was added to *Headliner*. The objective of the programme is to direct public attention to the current/social issues that happened in the past week. Since the programme consists of satirical acts, the production team follows a principle set by Sze: Do not capitalise on others’ pain, create no jokes about religion or names, and never show bad taste (HKBUCAA, 2016). *Headliner* uses different types of artistic elements to explain current issues, including role-play, onsite musical performance, clips from existing films, and sand drawing. The programme aims to appeal to both educated and less cultured audiences. In a discussion with Sze, he and I recalled that the duration of the current MV was short in the early 1990s as it was only a small part of the programme (personal communication, March 9, 2016). But now, current MVs are found throughout the programme. Like other RTHK programmes, *Headliner* runs by seasons and broadcasts on either the Jade channel of Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) or the Home channel of Asia Television Limited (ATV) based on the arrangement of the season, at least until April 2016 when ATV closed down. Additionally, re-runs of *Headliner* have been shown on Hong Kong Cable Television Limited (i-Cable) before 2014, and on RTHK 31 since 2014.

In the “Television Programme Appreciation Index Survey” conducted by the Public Opinion Programme of University of Hong Kong with local households, *Headliner* is usually listed among the top 30 programmes. In the 1998-2015 survey, the average appreciation score of *Headliner* was 74.50 (over 100) and the average awareness percentage of the programme was 69.89. The updated rating of the programme is not currently available, but the rating is much lower if it is shown on i-Cable and RTHK 31 (Cheung, personal communication, June 24, 2016) due to the low popularity of paid television and the competition from new television channels. Besides numerical indicators, the descriptions in the media also show *Headliner*'s positive status among the locals. For example, it is described as “the flagship programme of RTHK” and “the index of speech and press freedom of Hong Kong” (“Headliner, housewife’s low-class interests?” 2001; Kei, 2013, p.A05). When the author of this study discussed the rumour that the programme might be terminated with the RTHK informants, one of them commented that RTHK would be endangered if the programme was terminated.

Throughout the years, *Headliner* has been involved in controversies. In 1998, Xu Simin criticised the programme as “eccentric” (“Privatisation of RTHK,” 2011). Then in 2001, in his “one-minute-31-second performance” in the programme, the guest host Lam Chiu Wing dressed as a member of the Taliban, likened the Taliban government to the Tung Chee Hwa government, and joked that Tung should submit to the “northern regime,” Beijing. Tung was not happy with this and called it “a low-class joke” (Information Services Department, 2001). As Tung was the head of the government, some media commented that his personal criticism was actually a voice representing the government (“Compare the Hong Kong government with the Taliban,” 2001; “Chief Executive commented Headliner a low-class joke,” 2001). The pro-establishment camp and the Chinese government’s media attacked *Headliner* and RTHK for about two weeks after this. RTHK’s status as a PSB was debated: Was it a government department supported by taxpayers, or a government mouthpiece? At the same time, pro-liberals wondered if the criticism was a sign of the declining editorial autonomy of RTHK. A similar issue occurred in 2013. Tang Yun Kwong, a veteran civil servant, was appointed to be the Director of Broadcasting and the Head of RTHK at that time. He revealed to the public that *Headliner* was planning to use the Nazi Germany theme for satirical acts even though no such Nazi characters had ever been used in the programme (Kei, 2013, p.A05). The critic Kei Hiu Fung responded by

accusing Tang of misleading the public and destroying the programme's autonomy (Ibid.).

### **Current Music Videos**

Current MV is a combination of images of social issues and clips of music presented without narratives. It is a derivative creation that uses existing music. The original name of current MV in the production team is “comma” (Sze, personal communication, March 9, 2016), which literally matches its aim: to attract the audience's attention to stop and think about the issue. After running the current MV for 26 years, each MV is now standardised to about 2 minutes and 30 seconds in length; the MV will be allocated for a longer time if the issue covered is important. The use of music is not limited to Cantopop, but also includes Cantonese opera, English songs, and instrumental music. The success of message delivery with the current MVs is related to the selection of music and images, in addition to other factors, such as the audience's understanding of the current issues and their educational level.

### **Methodology**

As the focus of this project is the production of the current MVs, the fieldwork of this research aims to understand the production of the current MV through conducting interviews with the personnel related to *Headliner* and participant observation in the production process. Without knowing anyone working at RTHK, the author was fortunate to get referrals through snowball sampling to reach informants. The author first connected to the editor of RTHK's publication *Media Digest* and a senior executive producer who worked for *Headliner*, then to Ms. Gloria Yick, a producer of *Headliner*. However, this path did not lead the author to RTHK. The author did a phone interview to learn more about the programme, then got in touch with Mr. Forever Sze about four months later. The author conducted an interview with Sze and was very lucky to gain his trust at the first and only meeting as we found a mutual connection to the Academy of Film (AF) of HKBU. The author's past working experience at AF (the Department of Cinema and Television prior to 2010) also helped the fieldwork subsequently. Then Sze referred the author to Ms. Liu Wai Ling, the executive director of *Headliner*. This started the real negotiation for observing the production of current MVs on site at RTHK.

The author first visited RTHK on April 19 to have a meeting with Liu and Yick. Liu explained that their role in the production process was very limited, “If you say that we can select the current issues that happen in one week for production, we actually do not have many choices. The number of issues that happen in one week is fewer than you think. We are very passive” (personal communication, April 19, 2016). Two *Headliner* producers also agreed with this assessment during a visit on a comparatively “no-news” Friday (Cheung and Chau, personal communication, May 6, 2016). It was decided during the meeting that the author could shadow different producers working on a current MV. On the same day, Yick had not yet gotten a topic for that week. She said she would notify the author when she and her team finalised a topic. We talked for a while in the open office before the author left. Yick asked the author, “Did you ‘like’ our Facebook page?” This question actually caught the attention of the surrounding staff members, both *Headliner* and non-*Headliner* staff. Moments like this accelerated my immersion in the production team as well as in the open office. The author was introduced as “the scholar from BU,” and because at least three of the five producers of *Headliner* are HKBU graduates, we shared the memory of walking along the stairs of the Sing Tao Building (this is the shared memory of CTV or Communication students in general who attended the school prior to 2010); the author believes this made them more willing to talk to her during the observations.

### **A sample of the fieldwork**

There was a routine to the author’s visits to RTHK even when observing different producers. In the morning of April 21, the author received a message from Yick that she was working on the topic of *Ming Pao*’s termination of its executive chief editor. The author then went to RTHK in the afternoon and sat behind Yick, in the hope of tracing her ideas for building the current MV. In the open office, the author was in an environment filled with information on various current issues and ordinary noise of an office. While the author was looking at Yick’s computer screen, trying to follow her train of thought to produce the current MV, the dynamic, vibrant current issue discussion environment in the open office amazed the author. There were multiple phones ringing; staff members of different programmes were shouting out for help; and the three television screens were showing i-Cable and TVB news channels. While the author found the production environment interesting, she realised the nature of the issues to be included in *Headliner*: serious political and social issues to which all locals



should pay attention. Yick was looking for a suitable song to use in the MV, while planning for another section of the programme, writing an email to *Ming Pao* to request for a copy of a news clip on its website, reviewing the news of the incident, and searching for lyrics with certain keywords. In the evening, Yick told the author to go as she had not picked a song yet, but she was confident that she would start editing the day after and told the author to come back the next morning.

The author arrived at the open office the next morning. Yick told the author to wait for a while as she was not ready to edit the MV. A cameraman and a soundman arrived, set up the camera in front of Yick's desk, and filmed a video on the *Ming Pao* website by following Yick's instructions on different camera angles. After a few minutes, the crew left with another producer of *Headliner* for outdoor shooting. Yick then passed the MV storyboard to the author. The author skimmed it before heading to the editing studio with Yick. On the way, Yick mentioned that the plot of the MV had not been reviewed by the executive director, Liu, but she stated that Liu rarely banned their ideas. The author told Yick that the MV would be fine as the lyrics matched the situation (the author used a Cantonese word 到肉 in our conversation). Yick was glad to hear that, as the author was the first audience of the MV (Yick, personal communication, April 22, 2016). The author agreed with her that the song and the incident shared a sad mood as this incident jeopardised Hong Kong's press freedom. Yick then spent more than six hours in the editing studio with the editor to produce the MV. They were in discussion most of the time, sorting out where to find certain clips, which images to use, and which technique or effect to apply. The *Ming Pao* issue was discussed in the open office with the filming crew, in the editing studio with the editor, as well as in the filming studio with the soundman and the cameraman during studio shooting. These discussions were important as these personnel needed to understand the issue and the director's ideas related to the issue and the production. A current MV is therefore a group production rather than an individual effort.

### **Production and perception of current MVs**

Each producer has his/her own preference in producing the current MV. From about 1990 to 1993, Sze was the only person to produce the current MVs (Sze, personal communication, March 9, 2016). After 1993, each current MV has been produced by one producer. Most of the time, ideas are not generated straightforwardly and

immediately. Producers first need to do research about the topic by reading news articles, news clips, and/or meetings of the Legislative Council. Usually this is when they capture images, clips, and soundbites related to the issue. For song selection, one of the producers thinks about the melody; the other producers usually start by searching keywords in lyrics or browsing certain singers whose songs may have a certain style or theme. In addition to online resources such as YouTube and MOOV, RTHK has its own music library and lyrics database to facilitate this process.

The author was interested in understanding the current MV, especially the relationship between production and perception. The author asked Sze how his audience received the intended message he constructed. His response was “I do not know” (personal communication, March 9, 2016). He was not sure how and if the audience could perceive the message embedded in the current MVs, but he wanted to produce something closer to the audience’s life by utilising mostly Cantopop; his goal was to draw their attention to the current issues (Ibid.). The author attempted to understand the current MV from two perspectives: its similarity with television commercials and the utilisation of Cantopop. The current MVs are re-creations and are derivative works (mis)matching the music with the images of the social issues. The author suggested that the divergence and relevance were generated during the perception process; the divergence was evoked from the unexpectedness, while the relevance came from the awareness of the issues and the familiarity with Cantopop.

With their similar format and duration, the author suggests understanding the current MV as an advertisement, much like a television commercial. They are both a creation of combined music and images. One of the creative elements in both current MVs and television commercials is the combination of divergence and relevance in daily life. This is how the audiences relate to the message. Smith and Yang (2004) point out that effectiveness of advertising is linked to the creation of divergence and relevance by providing “advertising resonance,” which is a concept borrowed from McQuarrie and Mick and means a sense of correspondence – among the audience (p.42). The divergence and relevance can be expressed in different presentation formats or features and vary among different social groups (Ki, 1984, pp.32-40; Smith and Yang, 2004, p.42). According to Smith and Yang, the matter of processing and the “depth of processing” are “from simple message recognition to constructive processes like relating the message to one’s personal life, role taking, or imagining” (2004, p.40).

Though the author used the perspective of advertising to understand the current MVs in *Headliner*, it was more difficult to measure the effect of current MVs as compared to advertisements. The main aim of any advertisements is to attract target audience's attention and to direct them to buy the product or service advertised, in other words, to change their consumer behaviour. An advertising campaign's success can be measured by consumer awareness and/or the sales figure of the product or service advertised. However, no action is required after viewing current MVs. Current MVs aim to arouse the public's attention in relation to current affairs and to divert individuals from their daily routine, to think about the issues; none of these desired results are recorded. The effect of current MVs can only be measured within the context of the entire programme and reflected numerically, such as the Television Programme Appreciation Index Survey, ratings on television, and hit rates of the programme on the Internet.

Since Cantopop is used to convey messages in current MVs, understanding the status and functions of Cantopop among the locals is essential. The popularisation of Cantopop is directly linked to the development of free television services in Hong Kong, as the first popularised Cantopop song was a television drama's theme song "The Fatal Irony," which marked the beginning of the Cantopop era in 1974 (Wong, 2003, p.105).<sup>3</sup> While certain television programmes like dramas and variety shows on free channels have become a source of cultural identity construction, Cantopop shares the same social function as an attachment to these programmes. Therefore, Cantopop is traditionally linked to entertainment, not politics, and audiences tend to think it apolitical because of its entertaining nature.

The author suggests that the meanings of Cantopop come from three aspects: lyrics, melody, and the images/background of the personnel involved. Certain Cantopop personnel carry distinctive characters and a strong stance or images, which can affect perception of their songs. For example, audience nowadays concern much about the political stance of these personnel: Lyricist Lin Xi, producer Adrian Chow Pok Yin, singers Kay Tse On Kay, Denise Ho Wan Sze and Anthony Wong Yiu Ming are considered more "pro-liberal," while Ho and Wong are prohibited to perform in the mainland after their frequent appearances in the Umbrella Revolution in 2014.

In addition to the elements of divergence and relevance, the production of the current MVs can be viewed as derivative works of different levels. According to my informants, there are different levels of meaning in the production of the current MVs.

Yick commented that the depths of the meaning in the current MVs were based on the experience of the producer (personal communication, July 8, 2015). Sze explained that matching all the lyrics to the images of the issue was only the basic requirement of the current MVs, and the depths of meaning could be raised through using techniques like metaphor or polyphonic counterpoint, through the selected lyrics or melodies (personal communication, March 9, 2016).

The author selected two examples of current MV which help illustrate the two different production levels. Example 1 is about the new era of Hong Kong television industry. The band Grasshopper's 'Infinite Entertainment' is used to describe the situation, where more television services providers will bring more choices and more entertainment to the audiences. The melody is lively, cheerful, and fast-paced. The lyrics describe the situation closely:

Oh yeh alia 是時候放低包袱                      Oh yeh alia It is time to put down the burden  
娛樂細胞 天天發育 分分鐘有眼福  
Entertaining cells Grow everyday Having aural enjoyment every minute  
Oh yeh alia 能麻木更加舒服                      Oh yeh alia Being numb is more comfortable  
娛樂世紀 高歌作樂 分分鐘有眼福  
The era of entertainment Singing loud for fun Having visual enjoyment every minute  
  
吟吟沉沉 呢呢喃喃 成為娛樂節目  
Murmuring Twittering Become entertainment shows  
無無情情 無無聊聊 無窮娛樂節目  
Ruthless Uninteresting Infinite entertainment shows  
有理有理 有你有我 有老有少  
With reasons and without reasons With you and I With elderly and youngsters  
有喊有笑 迷迷糊糊 熱熱鬧鬧 大事大事慶祝  
Cry and laughter Confused and lively Big celebration  
  
[來挑選準備了的節目 來挑選編定了的結局]  
[Come to pick a show, come to pick an ending]  
請挑選一種心水爆谷 劃定座位欣賞壓軸  
Please pick your favorite popcorn Select your seat to watch the grand finale  
來挑選感動你的佈局 來挑選適合你的戲服  
Come to pick a plot that touches you Come to pick a role that suits you  
講不出應該多麼滿足 靜候下一分鐘繼續  
Cannot express the satisfaction in words Silently wait for the next minute to continue

Video clips of the opening ceremonies of ViuTV and RTHK 31, LegCo meetings with the Director of Broadcasting Leung Ka Wing and the Secretary for Commerce and

Economic Development Gregory So Kam Leung, and the dispute of granting the license to Hong Kong Television Network Limited (HKTV), are included in the MV.

Example 2 is about the incident of “waiting for Uncle Fat,” in which it was claimed by the pro-establishment camp that they abstained from vote because they were waiting for Uncle Fat (Hon. Lau Wong Fat) to arrive at the chamber; since the pro-establishment legislators did not vote, the pro-China government policy reform was declined. Anthony Wong Yiu Ming and Leslie Cheung Kwok Wing’s song ‘This Far That Close’ was selected. This song is about two people that have never encountered each other even though they may pass by the same space; a few music critics interpret this song as having a “stalker theme.” The melody is quite mystical with a moderate-speed. The lyrics describe and satirise the failure of voting as if the pro-establishment legislators and the chamber were in two different spaces. The lyrics are presented here as in the MV after the producer re-arranged some sections:

畫面在腦內乍現 波斯灣最南

Image appears in my mind The southern tip of the Persian Gulf  
燈塔中 誰人在約會我 不必真正遇見

In a light tower Who is dating me? Need not to encounter in life

是誰在對岸 露台上對望

Who is at the opposite shore? Looking at each other on the balcony  
互傳著渴望 你熄燈我點煙

Sending each other wishes You turn off the light, I light up my cigarette  
隔住塊玻璃 隔住個都市 Separate by a piece of glass Separate by a city  
自言自語地 共你在熱戀 Say to myself Fall in love with you

命運 就放在桌上 地球儀 正旋動

Fate is placed on the table A terrestrial globe Is spinning  
找個點 憑直覺按下去 Find a point Follow your heart and press on it  
可不可按住你 Is it possible to press on (catch) you?

讀：我懷疑我哋人生裡面唯一相遇嘅機會，已經錯過咗

Read: I suspect, the only chance to encounter each other in our lives, has been missed

月台上碰面 月球上碰面 Come across at the platform Come across on the moon  
或其實根本 在這道牆背面 Or, actually At the other side of the wall  
或是有一天 當你在左轉 我便行向右 都不會遇見

Or, one day When you turn left I walk to the right Never come across each other

[在池袋碰面 在南極碰面]

[Come across in Ikebukuro Come across at the South Pole]

或其實根本 在這大樓裡面  
但是每一天 當我在左轉 你便行向右  
終不會遇見

Or, actually In this building  
But every day When I turn left You walk to the right  
Finally we will never come across each other

我坐這裡 你坐過嗎  
偶爾看著 同一片落霞

I sit here Have you ever sat here before?  
Sometimes we see The same sunset

This current MV is a significant re-arrangement of the original song. But if one does not know the original song well, one will not notice. Images of that LegCo meeting, the post-meeting press conferences of both the pro-establishment and pro-liberal camp, and about related activities of the policy reform are used; the clip of Regina Yip-Lau Suk Yee sobbing in a radio programme, because of the disappointment of failing to vote, is embedded more likely for satirical purpose.

<b>Theme of Current MV</b>	<b>The new era of Hong Kong television industry (Example 1)</b>	<b>Decline of the policy reform – The incident of “waiting for Uncle Fat” (Example 2)</b>
<b>Broadcast date</b>	April 9, 2016	June 19, 2015
<b>Length</b>	2’10”	4’02”
<b>Song title</b>	草蜢 娛樂無窮 (Grasshopper – ‘Infinite Entertainment’)	黃耀明及張國榮 這麼遠那麼近 (Anthony Wong & Leslie Cheung Kwok Wing – ‘This Far That Close’)
<b>Melody/Lyrical theme of the selected song</b>	About providing entertainment and suggesting audience’s attitude; happy; fast speed	About the encounter/missed encounter of two strangers, as if having a “stalker” theme; mystical; moderate speed
<b>Popularity of the selected song</b>	Released in 1997	Released in 2002
	Unplugged, not found on YouTube	Original music video found on YouTube
	Believed to have no original music video	A solo version by Anthony Wong was sung in lyricist Wyman Wong Wai Man’s concert “Concert YY” (黃偉文作品展) in 2012, and then in the memorial concert of Leslie Cheung “Miss You Much Leslie · 10 · Concert” (繼續寵愛 · 十年 · 音樂會) in 2013
<b>Technique in use</b>	Follow the original song to arrange the images	Re-arrangements on the music (re-ordered sections of melody/lyrics)
	Using images of opening ceremony/promotion clip of different television channels, news report images from i-Cable and LegCo meetings, to express the situation of the local television industry in the post-ATV period	Using images before and after the incident, including LegCo meetings, pro- and anti-reform protests, press conferences of both pro-establishment and pro-liberal camps, to re-build the whole story
	The lyrics and melody match the situation of multi-providers providing lots of entertainment and information to the locals	The lyrics and mystical melody satirise the voting situation that many pro-establishment legislators were so close yet too far from the Chamber and failed to vote

**Figure 1 – Two examples of current MV**

Some comparisons can be made from the two examples above. The more important an issue is for the locals, the longer the producers make the current MV. Additionally, the selection of songs is not related to the popularity or the release date of the song; unplugged and awarded, old and new songs can be used in the current MVs. In Example 1, the lyrics and melody of the selected song matched the images.

According to the definition of Sze, Example 1 is categorised as the basic level as it is descriptive by matching the lyrics with the images of the discussed issue, and the relatively fast-paced and happy melody with the increased variety of free television channels and programmes. In Example 2, the combination of image and song created a satirical meaning. It is accompanied with the mystical melody. The MV successfully created a satirical atmosphere of the unexpected failure (as well as the irrational reason of waiting for “Uncle Fat” to join the meeting and vote). The awkwardness generated by the combination of the familiar images and the song makes the audience pay attention to it. The song is cut into sections and re-arranged to suit the construction of the story. Example 2 is then considered as a higher-level derivative work compared to Example 1. The songs’ original meanings can remain the same or can be changed significantly when they are applied into current MVs.

### **Stances of *Headliner* and RTHK**

As a flagship programme of RTHK, *Headliner* reflects certain positions of RTHK as a media institution. The general function of media in a liberal democracy, not authoritarian state, is to observe and keep the authority in check. Sze states that the role of media is to seek the truth, and he hopes that the satirical expressions in *Headliner* can encourage discussions that lead to better solutions of the issues (personal communication, March 9, 2016). According to the *Producers’ Guidelines* of RTHK, all programmes should “respect and reflect the generally accepted values in society” (RTHK, 2015, p.10). Therefore, to determine the stance of *Headliner*, one should examine whether the program represents the perspectives of the government or the general public, and whether they are pro-establishment or pro-liberal. According to Sze, if one says that *Headliner* criticises the government, the pro-establishment camp or the pro-China personnel, it is because the people in power belong to these parties since the handover (personal communication, March 9, 2016). However, when criticising the government is considered opposition to the government, its status as a government department has created tensions between RTHK and the government. The following discussion is going to examine the position of RTHK in the local television industry and as a PSB.



## RTHK and the Hong Kong television industry

The local television industry began with technologies and programmes imported from the West, mostly related to the British colonial rule and the British Commonwealth. The first television service, Rediffusion Television Limited (Rediffusion), re-diffused BBC's programme from the United Kingdom, and its broadcasting technology was supported by the British Commonwealth (Aitken, 2016, p.216). Because of the lack of technology and relatively high operational costs, neither the British government nor the colonial governments (including Hong Kong colonial government) in late 1950s had any interests in television, as they believed that television was for commercial interests (Ibid.). The only thing the Hong Kong colonial government did in the local television industry was to limit the number of free-television-service licenses (Ibid.). As illustrated in Figure 2, prior to 2014, the only period with three free television stations in Hong Kong was 1975-1978. They were: TVB, the first free television station for Cantonese-speaking audience; RTV, which was the free version of Rediffusion and later renamed to ATV in 1982; and Commercial Television Limited (CTV). As RTHK did not have its own channels for broadcasting, RTHK was not part of the discussion traditionally and academically. With the closure of ATV, official openings of RTHK television channels and ViuTV in April 2016, Hong Kong has three free television stations again: TVB, RTHK, and ViuTV. ViuTV is operated by HK Television Entertainment Company Limited with PCCW Limited as the parent company.

<b>1957</b>	Establishment of Rediffusion Television Limited (Rediffusion) Re-diffuse BBC's programmes, the first cable television service in Hong Kong
<b>1963</b>	Rediffusion Added a Chinese channel
<b>1967</b>	Establishment of Television Broadcast Limited (TVB) First free television service provider in Hong Kong
<b>1973</b>	Rediffusion renamed to RTV Became the second free television service provider
<b>1975-1978</b>	Establishment of Commercial Television Limited (CTV) The only period with three free television stations (三台鼎立), until 2014
<b>1982</b>	RTV renamed to Asia Television Ltd (ATV), till 2016
<b>2014</b>	RTHK was granted three Digital Terrestrial Television channels Started operations
<b>2016</b>	New era of the free local television industry with TVB, RTHK, and ViuTV

**Figure 2 – Brief development of Hong Kong television industry (1957 – 2016)**

A brief history of RTHK can be traced from 1928, as in Figure 3.<sup>4</sup> Before RTHK was officially established and named, it was a radio station operated by a group of amateurs in 1928. Then, the government stepped in with a grant in 1929, and recruited the station for war services until 1941. After the war, the government turned the station into Radio Hong Kong (RHK) in 1948. In 1968, one year after the establishment of the free television service and 11 years after the commercial television service in Hong Kong, RHK decided to set up its television division. The delay can be explained by the colonial government's lack of interest in investing in the relatively high-cost television services. After merging with the education television originally operated by the Department of Education, RTHK is established. RTHK's television programmes were arranged to broadcast at TVB and ATV. In 2014, RTHK had finally been granted three Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) channels to broadcast its own programmes. With the closure of ATV on April 1, 2016, RTHK was forced by the government to run two analogue signal channels, which originally belonged to ATV. RTHK now owns five channels in total; for comparison, the largest local commercial television station, TVB, has seven.

<b>1928</b>	Started a radio station as GOW Operated by amateurs
<b>1929</b>	Changed to ZBW Operated with governmental support
<b>1934</b>	Added Chinese radio channel ZEK
<b>1941</b>	ZBW and ZEK Stopped due to war
<b>1945</b>	ZBW and ZEK Operated by amateurs after war
<b>1947</b>	ZBW and ZEK Taken over by the government
<b>1948</b>	Renamed ZBK and ZEK to Radio Hong Kong (RHK)
<b>1972</b>	Added television section Renamed RHK to Radio Hong Kong Television (RHKTV)
<b>1976</b>	Merged with governmental education television Renamed RHKTV to Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) (Aitken & Ingham, 2015)
<b>2014</b>	Granted three channels with Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) signals RTHK 31, RTHK 32, and RTHK 33
<b>2016</b>	Granted two channels with Analogue signals (original channels of ATV) RTHK 31A, and RTHK 33A (RTHK, 2016)

**Figure 3 – Brief history of RTHK (1928 – 2016)**

## **RTHK and PSB**

The setup of PSB and profit-oriented media is to accommodate different voices and act as a platform for open discussion in a civil society. RTHK staff members seem to agree, as shown in interviews. For example, one of them mentions:

“I think my ideas are quite different from the majority, [...] I hope my programmes can give an alternative point of view. If they look from my perspective, they can perhaps see something new. I would not be able to do this in TVB [a commercial broadcaster in Hong Kong]” (cited in Ma, 1999, p.141).

According to Scannell, there are similarities and differences between a PSB and a commercial broadcaster, he suggests,

“The question of whether a market-led approach to broadcasting is better or worse than a public service-led view of broadcasting cannot be settled definitively one way or another. The approaches are complementary [...] Both are ways of making and distributing programmes. Both produce the same kind of thing (news, entertainment, and sports), but each has a different attitude toward the task in hand. For commercial broadcasting systems, the task was, at first and it remains so, to find a profitable way of programme making and distribution, and, for PSB, it has always been to find a way of proving broadcasting as a public service” (1996, pp.24-25).

There are some criteria to be a PSB. According to UNESCO, PSB is “financed and controlled by the public, for the public. It is neither commercial nor state-owned, free from political interference and pressure from commercial forces” (2011).

Historically, RTHK has been in part of a debate aiming to turn it into “Hong Kong’s BBC,” and to be the PSB of HK. As discussed above and shown in Figure 3, RTHK has always been a government department. Stated in government reports, RTHK is, “Hong Kong government’s broadcasting service” (Government Secretariat General Circular No.31/83, 1983, cited in Cheung, 1997, p.277) and “...operates in all aspects as a Government department. Under the framework agreement between RTHK and CEDB which sets out their working relationship and respective obligations and responsibilities, RTHK enjoys editorial independence” (LegCo, CTB(CR)9/17/9, 2009, p.2). Currently, RTHK is under the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau (CEDB). To avoid governmental or political pressure, the relationship between RTHK and CEDB was first indicated in the framework agreement prior to 2009. The Executive

Council meeting in 2009 suggested that the agreement between RTHK and CEDB should elevate to a charter modeled from the BBC:

“...we propose that the editorial independence arrangement currently set out in a framework agreement signed between RTHK and CEDB should be elevated to be in the form of a Charter to be issued by the Government. The Charter will take the form of a formal document that sets out the relationship between the Government and RTHK in respect of both ownership and regulatory control issues. It will make clear that RTHK is editorially independent” (Ibid., p.6).

In 2010, the RTHK Charter indicates that “RTHK is a government department under the policy purview and housekeeping oversight of the CEDB. The department and its staff are subject to all applicable government rules and regulations... (RTHK, 2010). The author believes that placing RTHK under the CEDB, rather than the Information Services Department, is an effective way to avoid being recognised as the government’s propaganda system. Though RTHK has a charter modeled from BBC, according to Aitken, “RTHK is not a public corporation along the lines of the BBC but a government department (2015, p.99).

The issue becomes more complicated when we translate PSB into Chinese. PSB can be translated and written as 公共廣播機構 or 公營廣播機構. 公共廣播機構 does broadcasting for the public, while 公營廣播機構 does broadcasting funded by tax revenue (Sze, 2016). From the definitions, the distinctions between these two translations have two different foundations: the former is on its functions, while the latter is on its funding sources. RTHK did not claim itself as a 公共廣播機構 until 2009 (Ibid.), even though the position of RTHK remained unchanged within the government.

In addition, the author argues that the government does not truly understand what a PSB is. It is mentioned in a governmental report that, “RTHK is the only publicly-funded broadcaster at present; likened by many to be the de facto public service broadcaster in Hong Kong” (LegCo, CTB(CR)9/17/9, 2009, p.2). This directly contradicts our discussion on the Chinese translation of PSB.

At the same time, this contradiction is related to the political stance of RTHK. If a PSB is to do “broadcasting as a public service,” should the stance of a PSB institution be on behalf of the public, or on behalf of the government? This is the root of RTHK’s challenge because of the differing opinions of the China government, pro-establishment camp and the pro-liberal parties. The pro-China camp always criticises

RTHK as an opposition force to the government. One of the rationales for keeping RTHK as a government-affiliated organisation is to have a PSB for government communications, as mentioned by a senior official at the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office in 1992 and by former Chief Executive Tung Chee Wah in 2000 (Aitken & Ingham, 2015, p.128; Clarke, 2002, p.53). However, as RTHK is supported by tax money, journalism scholar To Yiu Ming challenges that “RTHK should voice on behalf of the taxpayers” (Xu Simin commented “worse than the ‘two-state theory,’” 2001). Media commentator Leung Lai Kuen also comments on this conflict in her article:

“It seems like in the public’s minds that RTHK is a medium to reflect citizens’ opinions, rather than serving as the government’s mouth-piece. If pro-China parties force RTHK to take on the policy propaganda duty, RTHK might have difficulties being recognised among citizens (似乎在大部份市民心目中，已經認同香港電台作為反映民意的人民喉舌，多於作為官方喉舌角色，親中人士要勉強港台扮演政策宣傳任務，在民意認受性方面可能出現困難。)” (2001).

RTHK has a particular dilemma with this issue when the government and the public are at odds. As a recent example, the conflict between RTHK and the government became even more obvious during the Umbrella Revolution. RTHK seemed to be punished by the government for being a voice for the people and their rebellion. The government appointed Tang Yun Kwong, who was an administrative officer (AO) in the government as the Head of Broadcasting as well as the Head of RTHK. The government also declined to support a new broadcasting building for RTHK and equip RTHK with updated technology. Instead, RTHK was forced to take up two analogue signal channels because of the closure of ATV in April 2016.

It is imperative that the role of RTHK be redefined. The idea for RTHK to operate under “the BBC model” (or undergo corporatisation or privatisation translated from Chinese writings) has been raised several times without becoming a reality. Cheung concludes two main reasons for this failure: 1. Financial issues – Without the support from the government or private funding sources, the operation of RTHK cannot be sustained, and the staff members may lose their job security as civil servants; and, 2. Political reasons – The plan was rejected by the colonial government in 1971 as it did not see the threats of editorial autonomy invasion by its own government at that time (1997, pp.279-286). Realising the possible political conflicts between China and the

local government after the handover of Hong Kong, Cheung Man Yee proposed to change the structure to that of the BBC when she was the Director of Broadcasting in 1986 (Aitken & Ingham, 2015, p.126). When the plan was put on the discussion table again during the Sino-Anglo negotiation about the handover of Hong Kong, it was too sensitive to make changes to RTHK. Therefore, turning RTHK into BBC or corporatising RTHK did not come to fruition.

There are two root problems leading to the mismatch on the functions of RTHK. First is the understanding of the nature of a PSB. Aitken finds that PSBs around the globe operate in at least three models: 1. The “UK model” – PSB responsibilities are shared by BBC and other commercial broadcasters; 2. “Parliamentary” or “Proportional representation” model – “oversight of PSB is divided among political parties through proportional representation;” and 3. “Civic” model – “oversight is extended beyond such [political] parties to encompass socially important affiliations” (2015, p.97). However, to the Chinese government, there is only one mode of PSB: PSB is CCTV, “a state controlled propaganda system” (Ibid., p.98). In reality, the situation in Hong Kong is closer to “the UK model.” As stated in the Generic Code of Practice on Television Programme Standards, all television service providers, either free or paid, domestic or non-domestic, need to fulfill certain PSB responsibilities (Communications Authority, 2014, pp.30-34).

Second is the understanding of satirical criticisms. Satirical acts towards current issues are commonly found in both Chinese traditional and western performing arts, such as operas and plays. One of the reasons for performing satirical acts is to avoid censorship and criticism on the productions and the performers. However, the situation in mainland China has changed, and criticism of the authoritarian power became intolerant. Performing satirical acts of politicians or current issues are common in the West, and as the Hong Kong television industry developed with technology, personnel, and programmes from the West, it is not surprising to find satirical acts in local television programmes. Therefore, when *Headliner* criticised Chris Patten, former governor of Hong Kong, he made no response. On the other hand, when *Headliner* criticised Tung Chee Hwa, he fought back. This represents the (mis-)understanding and intolerance of Hong Kong’s culture and satires.

## Conclusion – Do we need RTHK to be Hong Kong’s PSB?

At this moment in 2016, is there still a need for RTHK to be a “real PSB?” The Chinese government would like to have an official mouthpiece, while the local government, the pro-establishment camp, and the pro-liberal camp understand the impartial image of RTHK among the locals is difficult to change. ATV and TVB are now considered the “CCTV” of Hong Kong. The locals distrust TVB and give it the nickname “CCTVB.” In order to control and limit anti-government voices, the government controls the free television service licenses.<sup>5</sup> RTHK seems to be left behind by different parties and continues a love-and-hate relationship with the government.

In 2016, among the three current free television stations, TVB, RTHK, and ViuTV, only RTHK is non-commercial. RTHK is somewhat “state-owned,” is a government department under CEDB, but is financially supported by taxpayers. It matches certain criteria of UNESCO’s definition of a PSB, but it is not independent. When RTHK criticises the government, its status becomes a problem to both the local and China government. This is however the value of RTHK: it is not hindered by commercial benefits when other commercial television stations tend to provide pro-China or pro-establishment comments in order to please the China government to access the mainland China market.

*Headliner*, the flagship programme of RTHK, has an established image of criticising current issues in a relatively lighthearted, funny, satirical way. Its main feature, current MV, uses the effects of music, mainly Cantopop, to attract public attention to social issues. This becomes the strength and weakness of the programme. It helps to avoid criticism and censorship, as the producers do not compose the melodies or write the lyrics. However, this may violate some laws, such as the proposed Article 23 of the Hong Kong Basic Law, which aimed to restrict freedom of speech that acts in any means against the government and restricts making derivative works for satirical purposes. As tolerance towards political opposition decreases, press freedom becomes more restricted. This increased restriction, combined with the high attraction of Chinese finances, creates a political environment in which *Headliner* should be treasured and preserved. A similar programme will not be produced under such a politically challenged and profit-oriented environment, as seen with television channels. The influence of the programme would be reduced if it stopped showing on TVB, even though RTHK now has its own television channels. Reducing the programme’s impact

on the society would be more detrimental than losing a flagship programme. Likewise, RTHK will lose its influence if it becomes a mouthpiece of the China government.

From this pilot study, there are a few directions for future research. Besides continuing the investigation on the impacts of RTHK's own television channels, the project can be developed into an experiment with *Headliner*'s audiences to study the relationship of production and perception of current MVs. Moreover, it is possible to analyze the content of current MVs, especially those in connection to certain historical moments or political issues, to understand the stance of the programme and RTHK.

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### **Notes**

1. The details about the initiations of changing the operation model or corporatisation of RTHK can be referred to Aitken, I., & Ingham, M. (2015), pp.121-141, and Cheung, A. B. L. (1997).
2. All Chinese persons' names are listed as family name first. If a person has a Christian name, the order of his name will be "Christian name-Family name-Given name."



3. In the footnote on p.105 of Wong's Ph.D. dissertation, he noted that "Cantopop scholars agree on this statement" that "The Fatal Irony" marked the beginning of Cantopop. Writings on Cantopop after the release of Wong's dissertation in 2003, mostly use this dissertation as a reference to state the popularisation of Cantopop.
4. The details of the development of RTHK can be referred to Aitken, I., & Ingham, M. (2015), pp.119-125.
5. Aitken pointed out the governmental "positive non-intervention" control of the local television services was by granting licenses to "a limited number of trusted corporate elites" and maintain a duopoly from the 1960s to the early 1970s (2015, p.99; 2016, p.216). Therefore, the current practice of limiting the number of free television licenses as if the continuation of the colonial rule to an untrusted colony on the control of the freedom of speech.

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[Xu Simin commented “worse than the ‘two-state theory,’” scholar responded “tax money is not government’s money.” (2011, November 30). *Apple Daily*, A2.]